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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL'S ECUMENICAL RAMAZAN: BOREK, BARDAKOGLU
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[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Turkey's lively diversity and internal contradictions are no more apparent than in Istanbul during the month of Ramazan. While nearly 70% of Turks as a whole are reported to fast during this period, the evenings' numerous iftars are often more social and political than they are spiritual in nature. The Pope's recent comments on Islam and his upcoming visit was a common theme, as was the French parliament's vote on the Armenian "genocide." Meanwhile, glitzy -- and decidedly secular -- cultural and commercial events continued apace in this sparkling, somewhat "arriviste" metropolis. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Ramazan season began literally with a splash -- that of American burlesque artiste "Dita von Tease" (nee Heather Renee Sweet) wearing nothing but two tassels and some strategically placed sequins as she swirled in a giant Lucite champagne glass filled with bubbles in front of several hundred of Istanbul's "Bosphorus elite" at a black-tie event marking the new partnership between Turkey's flagship fashion house VAKKO and American designer Zac Posen. The reaction to Miss von Tease and her impressive physique ranged from the predictable wide-eyed grins of the tuxedoed crowd (and catty remarks from the bejeweled but relatively less comely and more seasoned distaff side of the audience) to hushed expressions that this was inappropriate for the Ramazan season and would bring criticism to VAKKO's Jewish-Turkish owners, the Hakko family. Meanwhile, following a five-course dinner, the hundred or so Manhattan-based fashionistas accompanying Mr. Posen took to the dance floor, tossing back champagne and various shots of vodka and Jack Daniels, exclaiming, "Wow -- this place is just like New York!"

[1](#)3. (U) Other events were generally more sedate and conventional. The Istanbul AKP chairman hosted his traditional iftar for 2000 of his closest friends in honor of PM Erdogan and visiting German Chancellor Merkel. This was the second year in a row that the Istanbul AKP hosted the Prime Minister and prominent notice was given on the invitation and throughout the venue of the serial nature of the event. PM Erdogan and Chancellor Merkel both spoke to the assembled group, with Erdogan highlighting Turkey's commitment to join the European Union and Merkel focusing on concrete examples of cooperation between the two governments, notably plans to open a Turkish-German university.

[1](#)4. (SBU) We hosted an iftar on October 16 for a group of AKP Istanbul party board members who despite decrying "media bias" in reporting on recent tarikat scandals (reftel) were

confident that the AKP's strong grassroots organization would enable the party to retain a Parliamentary majority in next year's elections. Still, a party youth leader told us that he and his young AKP colleagues would prefer PM Erdogan not pursue the presidency next year; a sign that they believe the Prime Minister's star-appeal could make a difference during the parliamentary election.

15. (SBU) The Jewish community also hosted its annual iftar, a tradition begun nearly 5-6 years ago at the suggestion of Fetullah Gulen. While many in the community have become increasingly suspicious of the Gulenists and their larger motives, the tradition continues, with many of Istanbul's prominent politicians and business figures attending a dinner that routinely begins with an imam's call to prayer, includes a cantor's chant following the main course, and ends with both Muslim and Jewish benedictions. With the guest list topping 500, several prominent Istanbul district mayors were in attendance, including Beyoglu mayor Demircan and Sisli mayor Sarigul. The ecumenical nature of the event was underlined by the presence of minority religious leaders from the Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Syriac Christian communities.

16. (SBU) The Marmara Group Strategic and Social Research Foundation -- a staunchly secularist organization that includes former generals and ministers and prides itself on faithfully representing "Ataturk's Turkey" -- held its 10th Annual "Traditional Peace and Love Iftar" on October 13th. Instituted in response to the perceived "political Islamization" of Turkish society under Refah, Fazilet and later AKP leadership, the Foundation showcases Turkey's tolerant, secular nature by bestowing awards on Istanbul's various minority religious leaders and other advocates of secular governance. This year's iftar included no fewer than three representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, who were at pains to underscore the Church's desire for good relations with Muslims. However, there was notable backchatter when

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the various Catholic representatives spoke, which died down for other speakers in the lengthy program. End note.) Showing their true ecumenical stripes, the Marmara Group also included an AKP parliamentarian, on whom guests both to our right and left commented with a sniff: "Doesn't he just look AKP?!" This year's guest of honor was Turkey's General Director of Religious Affairs, Dr. Ali Bardakoglu, who brought the house down with his remarks that he'd come dressed in civilian attire to underscore the fact that one did not need a long beard, head covering or any form of dress to be a good Muslim, and that in Turkey's secular society, the common denominators of Islam were rationality and love -- unlike what we see on TV. Bardakoglu stressed the importance of religious freedom and civil values, while also noting (in an apparent allusion to the French "genocide" legislation) that "as Turks we will always face accusations, but we cannot afford to be reactionary; we must defend and live by the truth."

17. (SBU) Prime Ministerial advisor and Istanbul MP Egemen Bagis addressed a sparsely attended and very informal iftar sponsored by the American Business Forum of Turkey (ABFT) at a local hotel. Talk revolved around the PM's recent visit to Washington and various trade issues, including recent GSP developments and concern about the lack of an effective U.S.-based Turkey lobby. Much to the chagrin of the host, a rival business association chairman crashed the party. In the relaxed atmosphere, anecdotes freely circulated regarding Turkey's bureaucratic impediments to capital development and relative lack of commercial transparency. One businessman recounted his frustrating efforts to have his academic credentials earned in the United States certified for professional purposes in Turkey. He was directed to a 3-person windowless office in which one individual stamped "incoming degrees," i.e. from foreign institutions, and the other "outgoing." When he asked the third party what her

function was, the latter replied: "I manage the other two."

¶18. (SBU) Finally, the CG hosted an iftar October 17 for prominent Islam-oriented think tanks, commercial organization, charities and press, including senior editors from Zaman and Yeni Safak. A news columnist known for her hostile views toward the United States later wrote critically in Radikal's October 19 edition that both the U.S. and Iranian Consul Generals had hosted iftars on the same evening and "it appeared that her colleagues preferred the American function," despite U.S. actions in the Muslim world. Much of the conversation revolved around Turkish charitable giving and support for Lebanon and Gaza (the enthusiasm among Turks for the former and the difficulty, given the security situation, of the latter).

¶19. (U) Comment. The multiple sectors that have embraced iftar as a means to cement ties within and among Istanbul's various social and political groups, not to mention the diverse approaches to iftar in Istanbul, underscore the rich variety of ideologies, cultural influences and social norms of the city. Istanbul, a two-time imperial capital, remains a complex and varied tapestry of ideals and behaviors. Often compared to New York by political commentators as well as by Manhattan socialites, Istanbul, while reflective of a Turkey's "majority Muslim" population at large, is also a microcosm of a society with a varied and vibrant population.

JONES